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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: improving public-sector effectiveness

Statement submitted by Pax Romana, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.5/2004/1.

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1. One of the most important elements in public sector effectiveness is an effective educational system which includes higher education. Many international agreements including the World Declaration on Higher Education emphasize the important role of higher education:

"Higher education has acquired an unprecedented role in the present-day society, as a vital component of cultural, social, economic and political development and as a pillar of endogenous capacity-building, the consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace in a context of justice."[i]

The Dakar Framework for Action recognizes the important contribution of education to society as a whole:

"Education is a fundamental human right. It is the key to sustainable development and peace and stability within and among countries, and thus an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century, which are affected by rapid globalization."[ii]

2. Strengthening and supporting the public sector's emphasis on higher education bears fruit far beyond the educational system. Institutes of higher education serve as centers of knowledge and research for the community and state providing new information on science and medicine that can benefit other public sector areas. We acknowledge the benefits from partnerships between public universities and the private sector. However, we urge that these partnerships not claim the rights to the results, but rather share them with the general public.

3. Students also play an important role in social development. Many students intern or volunteer their time with NGOs and state agencies in the public sector. Students should be empowered with more opportunities to help make the public sector more effective.

4. In recent years, we have been deeply concerned with the changes affecting higher education. We are deeply troubled by the increased market based approach to education. We are especially troubled with higher education when students are treated as potential consumers instead of the actors in social development. This approach often leads to the curriculum being adapted to favor the labor market at the cost of humanities.

5. We believe that the role of education goes far beyond creating trained employees and employers for the labor market but has the important role in social development in educating students to be full well rounded citizens. We believe that the public sector depends upon the formation of students that take into account the principals of a holistic and integral education.

6. We are also deeply concerned by the growing trend in the privatization of the educational system. We are especially concerned that the World Trade Organization has listed Education as one of the 12 tradable service sectors. We affirm the Joint Declaration on Higher Education and the General Agreement on Trade in Services by a number of university associations asserting that:

"Higher education exists to serve the public interest and is not a "commodity", a fact which WTO Member States have recognized through UNESCO and other international or multilateral bodies, conventions, and declarations . The mission of higher education is to contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole by: educating highly qualified graduates able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity."[iii]

7. We believe that education cannot be treated or seen as a product to be bought and sold on the open market. In addition to negative impacts on the curriculum, privatization also risks violating the rights of people to higher education on the basis of merit as apposed to economic status. This is guaranteed in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

8. The privatization of educational institutions raises the cost of education to a level that many students cannot afford. In recent years, we have witnessed powerful examples of students reacting strongly to increasing tuition at public universities. Most notably in 2000, thousands of students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) held a nine-month sit-in shutting down the university, which in turn hindered an important part of Mexico's public sector. Similar strikes and protests against tuition increases and the privatization of universities have taken place in many other parts of the world.

9. The privatization of universities and the increase of tuition without broad scholarship programs often denies students their human right to access to higher education. With more than one billion people living on less than 1 dollar a day, even minimal tuition denies potential students access to education. Because of the rising cost of education, many students in all parts of the world are forced to work while taking part time courses. As a result, numerous students take up to ten years to complete their higher education programs, delaying the time when they can contribute to society as educated persons.

10. We recognize that many state sponsored institutions may not provide the best quality of education when compared to private universities. The solution for this should not be to give up on the state sponsored institutions in favor of private universities, but it should be to find ways to make public institutions of higher education more effective. An important part in making public education more effective is to fight corruption at all levels.

11. We support the principals agreed upon at the 1998 UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century demonstrating vision and action that highlights the important role of the state making pubic education more effective:

"The funding of higher education requires both public and private resources. The role of the state remains essential in this regard.

(a) The diversification of funding sources reflects the support that society provides to higher education and must be further strengthened to ensure the development of higher education, increase its efficiency and maintain its quality and relevance. Public support for higher education and research remains essential to ensure a balanced achievement of educational and social missions.

(b) Society as a whole must support education at all levels, including higher education, given its role in promoting sustainable economic, social and cultural development. Mobilization for this purpose depends on public awareness and involvement of the public and private sectors of the economy, parliaments, the media, governmental and non-governmental organizations, students as well as institutions, families and all the social actors involved with higher education."[iv]

12. We understand the need for partnerships between the public and private sector when addressing higher education. However, we strongly believe that these partnerships should not inhibit public educational institutions by reducing the provisions of education to students, or limiting the organization of research on behalf of society.

13. We believe that private institutions of higher education are also important for the society, but they should not be seen as the solution to overcoming the lack of resources of the state which fund public institutions. Unfortunately, private institutions are too expensive for many people. As quality education should not be limited to those who can afford it, private universities should work with the public institutions to help ensure all members of society have access to higher education.

14. To help make public education, especially higher education, more effective we encourage the Commission and its members to:

- keep in mind the importance of education, particularly higher education, as part of the public sector,
- promote and protect the human rights of students to have access to higher education based on merit and not the ability to pay. No economical or other form of discrimination can be accepted,
- honor the international agreements made on education, especially the Dakar Framework For Action and the UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action,
- to approach privatization of any public service cautiously and with the consultation of NGOs and larger elements of the civil society,
- encourage responsible and creative partnerships between public sector educational institutions and the private sector that do not limit the quality of education and research merely according to the economical and liberal market needs,
- help raise public awareness of the importance of state funding and support for education, from the primary to higher education level,
- find creative ways to support public universities in developing countries that maintains the quality of the education.

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[i] UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action Draft, 1998.

[ii] The World Education Forum Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April 2000. #6.

[iii] *Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, American Council on Education,* European University Association (EUA), and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), Joint Declaration on Higher Education and the General Agreement on Trade in Services. 28 September 2001.

[iv] UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action, 1998. Article 14.